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Book Review: The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations

Pauline Stoltz

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and politically – as indeed Haritaworn's grasping analysis shows us, again and again, with each chapter and each argument of their book. Revisiting her earlier, seminal work on haunting (Gordon, 1997), Avery Gordon reminds us that ghosts are there to call for accountability, not merely by keeping the past alive, but also by 'jamming up' the seamless transformation of the present into the future (Gordon, 2001). *The Biopolitics of Mixing* is an excellent example of such *jamming up*, an intellectual-political intervention at its finest. As the multiracialised figures that populate Haritaworn's book – the beautiful Eurasian, the happy mixed-race child, the Thai prostitute, the dysfunctional migrant youth, the Londoner, the Berliner, the ugly or the disabled 'bad' mixed raced offspring – enter (and exit) our 'sociological imagination' (Gordon, 1997) and our political horizons, we begin to reshape our thinking away from the 'moulds already prepared for us before we can even think of the question' (p. 22), towards embracement of 'unassimilable differences' (p. 158), towards unimagined possibilities, and towards justice that does not rely on abandonment and death.

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Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, Sage: London, 2011; 252 + xi pp.: 9781412921299 (hbk), 9781412921305 (pbk)

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The term intersectionality was introduced in 1989 by legal and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, in an attempt to capture the intersection of gender, race and class in the exploitation and exclusion of black women from legal processes in the USA. This intervention was part of an ongoing debate in both the USA and Europe on the way in which feminist researchers and practitioners should analyse what was sometimes termed 'social divisions', but increasingly came to be known as 'intersectionality'. Nira Yuval-Davis was one of the leading figures in this debate, not least due to her highly influential work on gender and nationalism. Today Yuval-Davis is one of the most prominent thinkers on intersectionality. In her latest book, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, Yuval-Davis continues and transforms the project she started in *Gender and Nation* (1997) by widening her focus. Whereas in the former analysis she examined gendered aspects of nationalist projects, in this recent work she explores contested contemporary projects of belonging which may have stronger or weaker links to nationalism.

The essential theoretical question raised by Yuval-Davis is why people's nationality would be more important to them than their religious and political beliefs, or, for that matter, their memberships of other communities: indigenous and diasporic, cosmopolitan or transversal? If nationalist politics of belonging are no longer the hegemonic

models of belonging, what other political projects are competing with nationalism in this day and age? The chapters of this book move along these lines and are concerned with questions of citizenship, nationalism, religion and cosmopolitanism, as well as what Yuval-Davis calls the caring question. This last issue is concerned with the ways in which politics and emotions both play a role in the prevalent feminist politics of belonging, which according to Yuval-Davis are the ethics of care, or the ways in which people should relate to one another in political, normative and emotional realms.

One of the crucial distinctions made in this text is that which exists between *belonging*, which refers to emotional attachment in 'feeling at home', and *the politics of belonging*, which concerns both the construction of boundaries and the in/exclusion of particular people, social categories and groupings within these boundaries. The politics of belonging addressed by Yuval-Davis are locally and globally situated and affect different members of these collectivities and communities differently. The importance of an intersectional approach in the analysis of the politics of belonging can therefore not be overestimated.

One of the main positions in Yuval-Davis's intersectionality approach can be related to the division which McCall has identified between *inter-categorical* and *intra-categorical* intersectionality (McCall, 2005). Whereas an *inter-categorical* approach focuses on the way in which the intersection of social categories, such as race, gender and class, affects particular social behaviour or the distribution of resources, *intra-categorical* studies problematize the significance and boundaries of the categories themselves. That is, scholars adhering to this approach to intersectionality ask, for instance, whether black women are included in the category of 'women'.

Instead of seeing these approaches as mutually exclusive, Yuval-Davis asks us to combine the sensitivity and dynamism of the intra-categorical approach with the more macro socio-economic perspective of the inter-categorical approach. People may be born in the same family at more or less the same time and live in the same social environment, she argues, but have different identifications and political views. It is therefore not enough to construct inter-categorical tabulations when we want to predict and understand people's positions and attitudes to life. It also becomes crucial to differentiate analytically between people's positionings along socio-economic grids of power; their experiences and identificatory perspectives as to where they belong, and their normative value systems.

I find this combination of inter- and intra-categorical intersectionality very thought-provoking. I also welcome the fact that Yuval-Davis's analysis does not take a starting point in a specific category or only in marginalized and racialized women, but includes all categories of people. In the context of the politics of belonging, this approach can only be seen as an advantage. It also minimizes the risk of 'just' adding categories together without investigating how they can mutually constitute each other.

Nira Yuval-Davis is a sociologist, and part of her project in this book is also to argue that sociological stratification theory should adopt intersectionality as its major theoretical and methodological perspective. This has already been done within critical legal theory and social policy, but not within sociology. It is for this reason that gendered analysis is only *one* of the major intersectional axes analysed, rather than the primary focus.

Having said this, a couple of issues can be raised. First of all, if this is a sociological project, what is of interest to those of us who are in other disciplines or who work with interdisciplinary issues? Second, the analysis is of a generic character, but how is it situated, considering the importance of situatedness to the argument made by Yuval-Davis? Third, given the fact that the *European Journal of Women's Studies* is prioritizing gender as a category in their publications, and that Yuval-Davis does not prioritize gender in her intersectional approach, what is happening to the gender analysis?

To answer the first question, I propose that despite this being a sociological project, the book can be fruitfully used as a textbook in several disciplines in addition to sociology, including gender studies, critical race studies, ethnic and nationalism studies and political science. It includes up-to-date introductions to notions of citizenship, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, which is particularly useful if these studies are combined with relevant empirical case studies.

The generic approach of the book addressed in my second question is both the strength and weakness of the work. Its strength is in the detailed account of different aspects of the politics of belonging, with examples from not only the UK but also from other parts of the world. This account reads impressively well, and is thought-provoking in its detail. The weakness, as also pointed out by Yuval-Davis, is that these examples are introductory generalizations which need further investigation within the specific contexts of case studies in order to bring out their shifting and intersectional effects, including those pertaining to gender.

As a political scientist, I was for example reflecting upon the contemporary ways in which nationalism plays a role in welfare politics in general and in equality politics in particular in the Nordic countries, where I am based. Arguably, the strong support for the welfare state is a particularity of Nordic nationalism. Gender equality is also a key aspect of the Nordic politics of belonging, and this has implications for our understanding of the challenges which can be recognized in the contemporary politics of gender and welfare in this part of the world. This point can be illustrated by underlining the problematic ways in which contemporary nationalist parties (in e.g. Sweden, Denmark and Norway) have formulated welfare and gender equality politics (basically stating that all natives are gender equal, whereas all migrants do not know the meaning of the word). This, in turn, raises theoretical and analytical questions about understandings and conceptualizations of the intersections of nationalism, welfare and gender. Here Yuval-Davis's thinking on the politics of belonging is inspiring, but such a case study also brings up other issues than those mentioned by Yuval-Davis (see, for example, Siim and Stoltz, 2013). These include a stronger focus on the role of the state and other formal political institutions, which are somewhat underestimated here. It may be, however, that my view is influenced by the fact that I am more of a political scientist myself.

These observations do not diminish the fact that the analysis conducted by Yuval-Davis is learned, enlightening and inspirational and, returning to my final question, feminist. Gender is not taken as a starting point in the analysis, but it reappears as a central and inevitable aspect at the end of every chapter. This is an obvious line of argumentation for any feminist, but unfortunately, it may for this reason be understood as a dismissible afterthought by readers without any affinity with feminism. I am therefore not quite certain whether I like this strategy.

At the same time, I can only agree with Yuval-Davis when, at the end of the book, she proclaims that feminist ethics of care and feminist transversal dialogical politics are needed in a feminist political project of belonging. Those are words that also resonate in the Nordic context. Hear, hear...!

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